

Speaking Tips

General Tips

Good communication comes in many forms and styles. No rule is ever set in stone and breaking the rules can sometimes be the best way to get your point across. You should figure out what works best for you and develop your own style. The tips I have included here should help most people become better speakers, but please take them and leave them as you wish.

Don't be fooled into thinking that rhetoric is an innate ability - it is a learned skill. Behind every perfect delivery is hours of careful preparation. The only way to become a good speaker is to practice. Take every opportunity you can to speak. No suggestion will do you any good if you don't take the time to apply it.

Whenever you do speak, always dress appropriately. You should look at least as good as your audience does. If you are appearing as an authority on your subject, dress better than your audience, if possible.

Always try to be informed on your subject. An audience can usually tell if you don't know what you are talking about. If someone asks a question you don't have the answer to, it is okay to say that you aren't sure. Be especially careful when your words may have undesired consequences.

After you speak, take the time to note what you did well and what you want to improve. You may also want to ask a friend to evaluate part or all your speech. When you do, remember that they are giving you their opinion. Don't become defensive at what they say. Their evaluation may give you valuable insight. On the other hand, it may be wrong. Either way, it can be a good learning experience.

Opening and Closing

A good speech opening always grabs the audience's attention, but don't confuse this with "shocking" the audience. Upsetting the audience will usually deter from your talk and should only be used when it is essential to the speech.

Since your opening sets the stage for the rest of your speech, you want it to be great. Even if the rest of your talk is extemporaneous, memorize your opening. You can work with it while rehearsing, but once speech time comes, don't change it, even if you think you have a better idea.

Some good ways to open include a startling fact, a question, a challenge to the audience, a good quotation, a story, or a displayed object. Do **not** open your speech with any of the following: an apology, a dull and commonplace observation, a long or slow developing statement, a trite question, or anything unrelated to your speech.

Your closing should be memorized as well and should effectively tie up your speech. It should indicate to the audience (along with your body language) that the speech is ending. Very often a closing will relate back to the opening, but this is not always necessary.

Many of the closing strategies are similar to the opening ones, especially the list of what to avoid. You may also want to close by summarizing your points, demonstrating what you talked about, or by appealing to the audience for action.

The Speech Body

There are many forms that the body of your speech can take, but it should always have good structure. An informative speech will usually have 3-4 main points that are introduced, developed, and then restated. A narrative speech will usually follow a storyline. Another option is to figure out where you want to end up and work backwards from there. Even entertaining talks and "roasts" should have both cohesion and direction to help the audience follow along.

It is important to know your audience and speak to their level and (usually) their point of view. You should always establish some common ground with the audience, even if your talk will be contrary to their beliefs. If you are trying to persuade your audience, keep in mind that you will probably have more success making small attitude changes than in altering someone's convictions.

When using facts in your speech, you should be prepared to support them with statistics, quotes, displays, or some other measure of authority. It is often best to briefly mention the source in your speech, but be prepared to give more detail if needed. Other ways to enhance the points you make include illustrations, comparisons, analogies, and showing the weaknesses of opposition (in a persuasive speech).

The body of your speech should almost never be written down verbatim. The exception is when your delivering information that must be conveyed precisely. When you first start speaking you may have the temptation to write every word down, but this will generally deter greatly from your delivery and should only be used as a last resort.

The best way to stop using notes is to practice. You should first try to move from written speaking to 3x5 cards, writing down key points, transitions, and areas where you have difficulty. If you need to write the whole speech down, try highlighting the major areas and work toward only using the notes at these areas. As you progress, you can learn to use a simple outline on a single card. Eventually, you will be able to deliver completely from memory (with plenty of prior rehearsal).

Since your opening and closing should be memorized, the body of the speech gives you the opportunity to adapt your speech and ad-lib. Personalizing your talk by asking questions or by talking directly to an individual can help build a good rapport with the audience.

Body Language

Effective body language is important every time you step in front of an audience. Although some formal or political speeches call for subdued movements, you should usually not be afraid to let your body speak. Body movements should be deliberate and precise, but look natural and spontaneous. Your movements should always enhance what you are saying. If it will detract from your words or confuse your listeners, leave it out.

Common body language includes showing physical characteristics (size, shape, direction, location), displaying importance or urgency (running, arm-waiving, fist-pounding), and comparing or contrasting (move hands together or in opposition). You can also act out scenes and display a variety of emotions with your body.

The size of your audience will determine which movements are appropriate. With a very large audience (people sitting more than 100 feet away) you should use exaggerated arm and leg movements, walking, and whole body movements. When everyone is closer you can use regular arm and leg motion, exaggerated mouth and eyebrow movements, and "yes" or "no" head movements. A medium audience (about 30 -100 people) lets you add exaggerated facial expressions, hand movements, shrugs, hand/face interactions, and small arm movements. When your audience is small, or when you are being televised, you can use most any movement, including regular facial expressions and finger movements.

Vocal Variety

In public speaking, how you say something can be more important than what you say. If you want to be an exciting speaker, learn to use vocal variety to add vitality to your delivery. Perhaps the single best thing you can do to improve your delivery is to vary the pace, pitch, volume, and demeanor of your voice to fit the words you are speaking. Your vocal variety should combine with your words and body language to enhance your entire delivery.

When making a presentation, don't clam up with fear - speak in a friendly and familiar manner, much like you would to your best friend. Speak clearly and concisely, placing emphasis when you want to make a point. Use your voice to exaggerate your emotions, but be careful not to constantly talk at an excited level. Constant passion is almost as bad as no passion at all.

A good way to improve your vocal variety is to practice reading passages out loud, conveying different emotions as you do. Many dramatic pieces lend themselves well for this or you can also try acting out your own scenes. You may also try imitating the voices of people around you. Whatever you do, try the same words over and over, varying the pitch, pace, volume, and demeanor until you find out what you like.

It is common to speak too quickly when you are inexperienced or under prepared. A good pace is 125-160 words per minute, but until you can "feel" a good speed you should try to deliberately slow down, unless you naturally speak at a slow pace.

Finally, you may want to practice your speech in front of a friend or speak into a tape recorder to see if you should make any changes. The voice you hear in your head can be very different from the one others will hear.

More on Voice

There are many ways you can use your voice to improve your speech delivery, I have included a few of my best tips below, so please feel free to make use of them.

Always stand up straight and breath fully when speaking. Try to relax your throat when you speak. A more natural quality will come forth.

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Just before you are about to make the most important point of your speech...pause. Few other things will draw an audience in as well. About a 2-3 second pause will usually work well, but you can adapt your own style.

If you are speaking with a microphone, always practice before speech time comes. Never get too close to the mike; it is designed to pick up your voice from a distance. If it doesn't, then turn up the volume. If you have trouble with your 'p's or 't's making a loud noise over the microphone, practice saying them the way you say your 'b's. The 'b' sound opens up your mouth more and less air is forced directly out in front of you.

If you want to project your voice more, try to move the voice vibrations from the front of your mouth to the back of your throat. The air for your voice should come from the bottom of your lungs. The longer path will lead to a better projection with no more effort. To practice bringing the air from the bottom of your lungs, stand up straight, then bend 90 degrees at the waist and speak loudly. Please note that although this is a good way to practice, I wouldn't encourage anyone to deliver a speech this way.

If you will be speaking outside of your local area, try to minimize the use of local slang and accent. Practicing in front of someone from another area is a good way to learn where you need to concentrate. You can also learn by listening to most national speakers and broadcasters since they have already learned how to speak before diversified groups.

Nervousness

It is perfectly normal to be nervous before delivering a speech, no matter how many times you have spoken before. You should not attempt to eliminate your nervousness, but rather learn how to control it and use it to your advantage. Don't try to hold it inside, it will only show itself in another way.

Nervousness adds emotion and energy to your delivery. It can enhance your movement and your voice and bring your delivery to a new level. A speaker who is never nervous will never be great.

Controlling your nerves starts long before you ever begin speaking. The single best way to harness them is to rehearse until you are well prepared. Although it is helpful to practice by yourself, speaking before an audience of family or friends will help you even more.

On the day of your talk, show up early and get to know the area where you will be speaking. Walk around, say a few words, look for squeaks in the floor, and generally get to know the lay of the room. You may want to meet some of the audience, too. It often helps to have a familiar face looking back at you from the crowd. But whatever you do, avoid making cutting remarks about someone in your speech. Even if you joke with them in private, no one wants to be embarrassed in front of their peers.

Just before you start talking, take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly. You should have your opening memorized and it will help to break the ice and get you rolling. You should try to talk about something you are familiar with. If you are excited about your topic, let it show. Your conviction and emotion will add greatly to your talk and reduce your anxiety.

Remember that the audience wants you to succeed. If you are prepared, your mistakes will be few and the audience will usually not notice them. If you do make a mistake, just pick up the pieces and carry on. Don't stop speaking and don't apologize. If you do speak with uncertainty or make an obvious mistake, you will probably only endear yourself to the audience. They will feel your pain too, and they will understand what you are going through.

Above all be yourself. Don't try to be someone else when you are speaking. People will like you for who you are, not who you pretend to be.